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# "Busking for the Queen of Faerie: Elizabethan Playwrights in Contemporary Fantasy Fiction"

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## "Busking for the Queen of Faerie: Elizabethan Playwrights in Contemporary Fantasy Fiction"

Kristen McDermott, *Central Michigan University*

The plays – your plays – have the power to make people believe. Some of it – this craft – ... is in your own vision and tongue.... It's Plato's magic; you make an ideal thing, and if the people believe that thing, the world itself must be beaten to the form.

Christopher Marlowe says this to his friend William Shakespeare in Elizabeth Bear's fantasy novel, *Ink and Steel* (66). Like Old Hamlet's Ghost, Shakespeare and Marlowe have survived their own deaths as well as the theoretical "death" of the author. The spectral persistence of the Bard and his contemporaries in modern Anglophone culture has been discussed at length by and many scholars who generally argue that the appearance of Shakespeare as a character in other literary works usually signals nostalgia for 19<sup>th</sup> century notions of the author as Romantic genius, divinely inspired wellspring of the narratives that have captivated centuries of readers.<sup>1</sup> His presence, they note, represents the authority and authenticity of the human imagination, and the pleasures of a pastoral, elite, explicitly English mode of discourse.

Contemporary speculative or fantasy fiction, however, by its very nature questions cultural and psychological verities. Shakespeare has made appearances in SF/F novels and short stories for nearly a century now, usually in the context of time travel tales; however, several contemporary fantasy authors in particular have dispensed with the trappings of time travel and instead recreate Elizabethan England as a lively suburb of British Faerie, imagining Shakespeare's encounters with the Fae as the source of his particular genius. When Shakespeare enters a fantasy novel, in other words, the goals of fantasy fiction (infusing a realistic setting with mythic and supernatural elements) become

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1 Most notably Stephen Greenblatt (*Shakespearean Negotiations, Hamlet in Purgatory*), Douglas Lanier (*Shakespeare and Modern Popular Culture*), Michael Dobson (*The Making of the National Poet*), and Paul Franssen ("Shakespeare's Afterlives" and the forthcoming *Shakespeare's Literary Lives*).

intermingled with those of historical fiction (dramatizing, explaining and deepening the historical record). There are now enough fantasy novels that feature William Shakespeare in a prominent character role to create a genre in themselves; to look at them as a group reveals a new variant in what Douglas Lanier has noted is a longstanding project to use him as “a focus for fantasy and iconoclasm” (112). Lanier categorizes Shakespeare’s modern appearances in fiction as falling into two subgenres: “*vie romancée*, fictional biography, and...*vie imaginaire*, biographical fantasy” (115). And Veronica Schanoes has noted, “Historical fantasy is thus a subgenre that opens up alternative ways of understanding how history has worked, both in the sense of providing a ‘secret’ history...and in the sense that they call into question the distinction between history and fantasy that underlies the legitimacy of historical discourse” (246).

Such a distinction can disappear even in “straight” historical fiction about Shakespeare, given that the beliefs of his own time contain what our own age defines as elements of fantasy: ghosts, demons, witches, and fairies were real to most of Shakespeare’s contemporaries. Therefore, even a realistic fictional treatment of the poet qualifies as literature of the supernatural. The fantasy novelist Greer Gilman notes, “Elizabethan—and Jacobean!—England is a chimaera, a fabulous creature. Writers can play with contraries: mean streets and green fields, court and commoners, new sciences and old beliefs. I got to put Galileo and Titania in one story. What more could I want? The period is very dark, inherently, both cruel and brilliant. They saw ‘the skull beneath the skin’” (Personal communication).

But *why* link historical persons like Galileo with mythic figures like Titania into the same narrative in the first place, when fantasy allows authors to invent as freely as they wish? The impulse to locate the fantastical within the historical is a complex one, related, as Schanoes points out, to the process of world-building undertaken by both the historical novelist and the author of high fantasy (236). Contemporary fantasy writers seem to be particularly attracted to the ready-made setting of medieval/Early Modern Europe; this may be at least partially related to the gothic roots of early speculative fiction, in which nostalgia for a romanticized past is explored through dreamlike narratives of ancient magic and supernatural beings, and partly related to the dominance of

J.R.R. Tolkien's medievalism over the modern form of the genre in the U.S. and England.

Acting on such impulses, contemporary fantasy authors often pick up where Shakespeare left off in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and recreate the mythos represented by Titania and Oberon, imagining them as active residents of Elizabethan England, despite their Ovidian and Norse origins. It was Shakespeare, Spenser, Jonson, and Greene who appointed them the faery patrons of England in Early Modern poetry; it is understandable that fantasy authors draw on this literary rather than the scholarly traditions in their own adaptations. The English literary development of these figures has been recently and ably outlined by Kevin Pask in *The Fairy Way of Writing*; my specific interest here is in the ways contemporary fantasy authors create narratives that put these fairy figures into direct contact with their progenitors – the Elizabethan playwrights Shakespeare, Marlowe, and Jonson – in narratives that combine the mythic and the historical, by way of a recently revitalized (and to some extent invented) Anglo-American interest in folk religion.

The emergence in the last few decades of serious and sustained interest on the part of scholars and artists on both sides of the pond in the pagan wellsprings of English folk traditions have resulted in a number of Britons (and their Anglophile American cousins) studying and practicing what has come to be called the “Faery Faith,” using the scholarship of archaeological, historical, folkloric, and linguistic studies to access ancient Celto-British lore and traditions in the interest of recreating an authentic spiritual and cultural “British” experience.

It has become impossible to detach the interest on the part of contemporary fantasy authors working with British cultural materials from the Neo-pagan movement that developed among English and American enthusiasts of myth and folklore in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Neo-paganism has been a hallmark of Romantic Anglophone cultural moments from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century to today, spiking among the Gothic revivalists of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, the Spiritualists of the Edwardian period, the countercultural movements of the 1960's, and the New Age enthusiasms of the 1990s-present. Practicing neo-pagan scholars like Philip Carr-Gomm suggest that a traceable vein of pre-Christian British mysticism feeds all the English poets of the fantastic, from the Gawain-Poet to Gaiman, but lingering especially on Shakespeare.

However, anthropologists and other scholars of the ancient note that many of the popular beliefs of neo-pagans are rooted in literary rather than anthropological sources – often creating a chicken-and-egg debate among practitioners and academics.<sup>2</sup>

It is by now a commonplace that the purveyors of popular Anglophone fantasy – the numerous heirs of J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis – and specifically authors who choose medieval/Early Modern settings and themes, derive from the same cultural roots, which appeared simultaneously in America and England during the 1960s. Or to put it more simply, the “flower child” generation combined a love of all things faerie and all things Renaissance into a fertile genre cobbled together from Gothic romance, Pre-Raphaelite nostalgia, Merrye Olde Englyshe pop culture references, and academic folkloricism. Pask notes the strong presence of Tolkien in such “cultural magic” movements: “Youth culture did not hesitate to grant Tolkien the status of magus, featuring him prominently in its syncretism of various forms of magic and mysticism: Aleister Crowley, Glastonbury, Hobbits, hippies, and Radical Fairies” (143).

The fantasy authors of the current generation, influenced by their hippy-era elders, take for granted the conflation of British Faery and historical fantasy. In contemporary popular depictions of Faerie, they reject the Victorian imagery of feminized sprites, and instead evoke dark, eroticized figures of generational power heavily influenced by both Tolkien’s Elves and Anne Rice’s vampires. Supporting roles played in such fantasies also include Christopher Marlowe, Ben Jonson, the “Dark Lady,” Henry Wriothsley, and Elizabeth I herself, often creating a community of humans willingly or unwillingly glamoured into cooperating with the Fae, usually in enterprises that represent threats to the sovereignty and mythic heritage of England. I will discuss in this essay a few contemporary examples: Neil Gaiman and Charles Vess’s Shakespeare chapters in the graphic-novel series *The Sandman*; Sarah Hoyt’s *Magical Shakespeare* trilogy about Shakespeare and Marlowe’s involvement in faerie wars, Elizabeth Bear’s *Promethean Age* series, which also presents Marlowe and Shakespeare, this time as lovers and co-conspirators against the enemies

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Ronald Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

of Elizabeth and Faerie; the horror graphic-novel series, *Kill Shakespeare*, which imagines the Bard as father-god to a world populated by his characters; and a new entrant into the genre, Greer Gilman, who presents Ben Jonson as a skeptical investigator into supernatural crimes.

Pask, tracing popular English fairy literature's origins in Shakespeare's plays, defines it as a form that, true to its origins, is self-referential, erotic, and offers audiences the experience of "re-enchantment" during times of religious or authoritarian oppression. For Pask, the genre in its English form is inseparable from drama, noting that the "historical process of disenchantment represented an opportunity for the theater, which could present 'falsehoods' on the stage, at least in the form of fictions, with relative impunity"(4). Such an effect is multiplied when contemporary authors not only use Shakespeare's fairy stories as source materials, but also put the poet himself into the narrative.

For contemporary authors, however, the impulse seems not solely the re-enchantment of Shakespearean texts, now associated with authority and compulsory reading, but also the revival of an anti-Enlightenment origin narrative for Anglophone culture. The goals of contemporary fantasy's use of the Elizabethan stage tend to fall into certain impulses: the historic, the erotic, the iconoclastic, and the mythopoeic. Authors of historical fantasy (including Gaiman, Hoyt, and Gilman) attempt to fill tantalizing historical gaps either in Shakespeare's biography or Elizabethan history, providing real dramatic events with fantastic origins. Such narratives, which anchor fantasy in real-world contexts, also tend to explore the erotic possibilities of such interactions. The appeal of Bear's, Hoyt's, and Gilman's approaches, which give Shakespeare an active sex life, is the subversion of a subject traditionally associated with elite culture; such a practice is true to the Romantic roots of modern fantasy, which often sexualize the creative impulse, as Pask points out in his explication of "the sexuality of the fairy way of writing" (9). Similarly, the carnivalesque subversion of a chaste Victorian image of the poetic genius can also result in an iconoclastic treatment of the poet himself, as in the *Kill Shakespeare* series, and also in Gilman's and Hoyt's narratives, which center on Shakespeare's rival poets. In these narratives, Shakespeare is not only sexualized but also transgressively mocked as a

fool, a pawn, a drunk, or a plagiarist, whose fame develops at the expense or with the collusion of his more able colleagues, Marlowe and/or Jonson.

However, when the subversive elements are contextualized in more ambitious narratives, such as Bear’s and Gaiman’s, such iconoclasm serves to build mythopoeic connections across historical eras. Such authors assert a common English or Anglophone mythos that persists through genres and time by inserting Shakespeare into the Celtic canon, and thereby create an interconnected, alternative, British mythic narrative more accessible to the non-academic (and often female) reader and writer than such patriarchal, epic, militaristic sources as the *Mabinogion*, the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, and the alliterative *Morte Arthure*.

By no means the first such, but by now the classic and most-imitated example of imagining Shakespeare and his players as inspired by the figures of British Faerie, occurs in Neil Gaiman and Charles Vess’s pair of chapters in the *Sandman* graphic novel series. 1990’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* presents Shakespeare and Lord Strange’s Men in a command premiere of his fairy comedy on a Sussex hillside marked by the Long Man of Wilmington, a chalk outline that popular legend dates to the Neolithic period (although archaeological evidence points to the 16<sup>th</sup> century as a likely date). Folklorists like Carr-Gomm have linked the monument to early Druid rituals, and modern-day Neo-Pagan revivalists continue to stage morris-dances and other folk activities at the site.

Gaiman’s narrative opens as the animated Long Man opens the hill, out of which issues the audience for the command performance: Oberon, Titania, Puck, and their fairy attendants. The commissioner of the play is Morpheus, the title character of the Sandman series, a figure of classical myth whom Gaiman imagines in his Spenserian incarnation as the Hadean Lord of the realm of dreams. The conflation of the Celtic realm of Faerie with the Hadean classical myth is a common feature of the “dark fantasy” genre, in which mythic/heroic settings are intermingled with gothic, horror, and tragic storylines. Such narratives reimagine the denizens of fairy as embodiments of disturbing and destructive natural forces, countering the figures of innocence and mirth associated with the more widely-known Victorian fairies popularized by Disney and children’s literature.

Gaiman's Shakespeare appears first as an entrepreneur and a father, leading his son and his bewildered fellow actors into the countryside to mount a performance for the mystery patron. The audience from under the hill watch the play at first with confusion and then delight as they recognize themselves personated. Titania is intrigued by the changeling boy, who is played by Shakespeare's son, Hamnet. Puck, depicted as a frightening, fanged goblin rather than a merry elf, decides to enter into the performance himself, enchanting his portrayer and donning his actor's mask. Shakespeare himself is depicted (through Hamnet's report) as distant and self-absorbed, intent only on the performance, which we learn he "owes" to Morpheus as part of a bargain.

This bargain refers to an episode in an earlier series chapter, "Men of Good Fortune," which presents the talentless Shakespeare drinking with Marlowe, moaning that he would make any bargain to be able to write as well. Morpheus takes him aside to make an "arrangement," not revealed until the later chapter, in which we learn that The Dream Lord has chosen Shakespeare to transmit "the great stories" of Faery, in homage to the race that is preparing to depart the Earth. In the course of the play's performance, Puck takes over his own role and decides to remain on Earth to continue bedeviling mortals, and Titania invites little Hamnet (who has played the changeling boy) to join her train, foreshadowing his death two years later.

Shakespeare reappears in the series in its final chapter, laboring in Stratford despite familial distractions over the second commission for Morpheus (and his final play), *The Tempest*. Gaiman incorporates a wealth of biographical detail, including the Quiney family into which Judith married, and sly references to William and Anne's marriage. Shakespeare is visited by Ben Jonson, his character similarly fleshed out with biographical references. The two compose the famous Guy Fawkes doggerel and discuss ways to structure *The Tempest*, which Shakespeare has found frustratingly slow going. The play completed, Will delivers it to Morpheus in a dream, asking for a conversation as compensation for a life spent in his service – a life that has cost him his human connections with family and friends, and (as Jonson reminds him) a variety of real-life experiences. In their conversation, Shakespeare expresses regret over years of "watch[ing his] life as if it were happening to someone else,"



seeing his emotional experiences (even the death of his son) as fodder for drama.

In this episode, positioned as it is at the end of the series, it becomes clear that Gaiman has created in Shakespeare an avatar for himself. He has noted in interviews that he wanted to present Shakespeare as a fellow fantasy author, and therefore chose his two “original” plays as subjects. In their conversation, Morpheus tells Shakespeare that he wanted a play about a mage who abjures his magic, leaves his island, and rejoins the living, as Morpheus himself – an immortal god – never can. The chapter ends with Prospero’s epilogue, equating the end of Shakespeare’s career with the end of the *Sandman* series. Gaiman, a prolific and beloved fantasy author whose own personal image is as well-curated as his created worlds, simultaneously “provid[es] contemporary fantasy-writing with a Shakespearean genealogy,” as Lanier suggests (123), but also perhaps claims a parallel personal role of the bard of modern fantasy.

Even in less capable hands, the insertion of William Shakespeare into the parallel worlds and lore of Celtic Faery creates a vibrant and suggestive alternate mythos. The *Shakespearean Magic* trilogy by Sarah Hoyt is an example of an author deeply immersed in the minutiae of Elizabethan history, using Faery to explain and motivate the political actions of characters like William Shakespeare and Christopher Marlowe. The playwrights are here depicted as kindred spirits who share a past sexual entanglement with the same powerful fairy, Quicksilver, a shape-shifting male/female presence. Quicksilver him/herself is introduced in the first novel of the trilogy as a Hamlet figure, the passed-over heir to the throne of Faery, tormented with indecision over avenging the deaths of his parents, Oberon and Titania, whose murderer, Oberon’s older brother Sylvanus, now occupies the throne. Quicksilver uses his female aspect, Lady Silver, to seduce the newlywed rural schoolmaster, Will Shakespeare, into aiding his revenge plot. The plot is successful and Quicksilver is restored to the throne, but Shakespeare comes away from the experience with both a distaste for and addiction to the fantastic, the erotic, and the literary.

In the second novel, Hoyt makes it clear that the world of illusion and drama is not what draws Shakespeare to London – rather, it is his dream of making a living as a poet and breaking out of the world of trade in which

he feels trapped in Stratford. Shakespeare shares the narrative with Christopher Marlowe, whose own past affair with Lady Silver has touched him with madness and a desire for danger. In fact, Marlowe dominates the tale, ultimately giving his life to save his former love, Quicksilver, and all of Faeryland – a sacrifice that is disguised as his murder in Deptford. At the end of the tale, it becomes clear that the hapless, untalented man from Stratford will inherit, via magical transference, Marlowe's talent.

The third novel finds Shakespeare successful and prosperous three years later, but tormented at the thought that his words are Marlowe's, not his own. In attempting to communicate with Marlowe's ghost, however, Shakespeare and Hamnet become trapped in another dimension, caught in a bewildering vortex of magic. In this volume, Will attains Prospero-like powers and learns that the Fae are attracted to him for his "soul too large to be contained in any time or place" (loc. 4162). Although Hoyt's theme is ambitious – a complex mythos in which Shakespeare must reconcile the male and female aspects of his own creative psyche, externalized as a seductive fairy muse – the narrative is impenetrable and long swathes of Shakespearean text are shoehorned into her own characters' dialogue in a way that seems more dutiful than inspired. Even though both Hoyt and Gaiman have created a scenario in which the death of Shakespeare's son is reimaged as the boy's passage into Faery, reflecting a common need to revise historical events that seem too tragically unfair, Hoyt's fantasy that Shakespeare's creative genius has a supernatural origin derives simplistically from the Romantic concept of the *furor poeticus*, and makes for an extended narrative that seldom escapes reductive predictability.

More satisfying are the *Stratford Man* novels by Elizabeth Bear, who like Hoyt holds an advanced degree in Shakespearean studies. She posits in her duology, *Ink & Steel* and *Hell & Earth*, a similar scenario – that Christopher Marlowe and William Shakespeare find themselves enmeshed in the internecine battles of Faeryland – but creates a much more complex alternate reality influenced by the new genre of "urban faerie" and her own more sophisticated references to Elizabethan politics and espionage. She also creates extended sexual tension between the two playwrights, who can only meet occasionally, as one occupies the mortal realm and the other is usually trapped in Faery. These novels are overtly motivated by a desire to "queer" the popular history of the Renaissance (and Bear is a popular figure in SF/F gender-experimentation), but also

resemble in this the impulse in fan fiction toward “slash” fiction – amateur narratives that describe and celebrate same-sex relationships between popular fictional characters. Bear’s synthesis of “slash” (which she herself identifies this novel as, partially) and historical fiction reflects a familiarity with recent scholarship into the period (“Neal”).

In these novels, Faery is not the mystic source of creativity for mortals but rather a parallel commonwealth, mirroring its politics and benefiting from its artistic promiscuity. Bear further complicates the narrative by introducing a third realm, Hell, headed by Lucifer, and shifting what she herself has called in her weblog “Kit and Will’s Bogus Journey” into an Orphic tale of sacrifice and redemption (Bear, 2005-11). Shakespeare and Marlowe must negotiate with the royalty of Faery and of England, as well as with Lucifer – identified simultaneously as Prometheus – in their efforts to save England. Bear’s interlacing of politics, religion, and erotica is thoughtfully designed, the focal point being the resurrected body of Marlowe, penetrated and possessed frequently throughout the narrative by human and fairy lovers, instruments of torture, and even angels, fallen or otherwise. The Satanic human factions threatening England, its Church, and its sister kingdom of Faery are known as Prometheans, and Bear explicitly conflates classical, pagan, and Christian myths. “All stories are true” is the mantra repeated by her characters, with only a vaguely-defined God exempt from characterization.

A narrative in which William Shakespeare and Christopher Marlowe conduct a passionate *ménage-a-beaucoup* with angels, devils, fairies, and mortals is irreverent theologically, biographically, and literarily. Protestant and Catholic theology, so vital to a real-world understanding of Shakespeare’s life and times, nearly always become marginalized in fantasy in favor of a secular spirituality that historians identify as having its roots in the heteroglossia of Early Modern popular culture. Pask cites Keith Thomas’s research into the ways that “Shakespeare’s theater occupied the place partly abandoned by old folk beliefs and recently discredited Catholic rituals” (2, 17). But contemporary fantasy has yet to find a way to allow a “real” presence of Faery to coexist with Christianity, perhaps due to a general reluctance on the part of contemporary authors to privilege one mythos over another.

Or perhaps Shakespearean fantasists have come to believe with modern critics that bardolatry is a type of secular religion itself. The graphic novel series, *Kill Shakespeare*, written by a Toronto duo, Conor McCreery and Anthony Del Col (who may well be reacting to a childhood spent in compulsory school trips to the Stratford Shakespeare Festival), does away with historical contexts entirely and imagines a fantasy world made up of Shakespearean characters promiscuously thrown together, created by a Shakespeare whom they all regard as a god. The world is Elizabethan in its appearance, and is clearly influenced by the imagery of Gaiman and Vess's Shakespearean chapters. The protagonist is Hamlet, who has been sent by Lady Macbeth and the three witches on a quest to recover the absent god's Golden Quill, with which they hope to win the perpetual war between the Paladins, led by Lady Macbeth, Richard III, and Iago, and the Prodigals, led by Falstaff, Juliet, and Othello. The war is resolved in the first two books of the series, the second of which introduces the god Shakespeare himself, an alcoholic, hag-ridden figure who refuses at first to intervene in the suffering of his "children."

This initial image of Shakespeare made me at first suspect that McCreery and Del Col were engaged in the anti-Stratfordian project of Shakespeare libel, like the screenwriters of the recent film *Anonymous*. Many authors through the ages have presented a buffoonish Shakespeare whose talent serves only his mercenary impulses, or is even nonexistent, a mere front for Marlowe, De Vere, Bacon, etc., often in order to support an "authorship question" agenda. However, in the *Kill Shakespeare* narrative, the playwright reclaims his art and eventually fights on the side of the Prodigals, defending his characters' desire to direct their own destinies. Book Two ends with the image of Shakespeare charging Hamlet to read Sonnet 71 ("No longer mourn for me when I am dead") to his "children" as he disappears to walk anonymously among them. In Book Three, Shakespeare's magical quill falls into the hands of the megalomaniacal Prospero, and the heroes must attack him on his magic island before the wizard uses the quill to wipe out the whole of Shakespeare's universe. At the conclusion we learn that Prospero was Shakespeare's star pupil, and used the creative power he learned at the master's feet to isolate himself in a nightmarish black hole of dreams and visions. At the climax, given the opportunity to murder his creator and create his own worlds, Prospero chooses to destroy himself with the quill

in expiation for driving his daughter Miranda into madness and nymphomania.

Although it creates canny references not only to Shakespeare's plays and biography, but also to classic comic series like *Sandman* and *The Watchmen*, the series is marred by an inconsistent approach to Shakespearean language, and a lack of internal logic to the character relationships. What is notable, however, is the image of Shakespeare as a “world-builder” – an author along the lines of fantasy superstar George R.R. Martin, who has created a huge interconnected alternate reality, in which he manipulates and kills off characters seemingly at random. Neither the format nor the skills of the author/artists allow for a satisfying inquiry into the metafictional questions raised by such a promising concept, but the series itself has been well-received by fans of the comic book form's particular facility with recombining characters from different fictional worlds into a larger allusive narrative. This is the same project pursued by more celebrated comic authors like Gaiman, Alan Moore and Frank Miller, who create complex metafictional narratives out of the intermingled backstories of DC and Marvel Comics' characters. It is only surprising that it has taken so long for comic books to give the same treatment to Shakespeare, whose characters have inspired enough adaptive metanarratives to constitute a scholarly field in itself.

More successful stylistically is Greer Gilman's lyrical pastiche of Shakespearean theatre, murder mystery, and supernatural horror. In her novellas (one hopes these are sections of a novel-in-progress) Shakespeare is not present in the action, but appears as a constant goad in the grumpy thoughts of Ben Jonson, the protagonist of the narrative, who finds himself unwillingly drawn into intrigues and plots. His adventures develop in a gossipy, name-dropping, dialogic style of a deliriously virtuosic, allusive Elizabethan sort. Gilman, another Shakespearean scholar, has the bona fides to accomplish this tour-de-force; she is the author of the chapter in the *Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature* on “Fantastic Languages,” where she asserts, “Creators of a world begin, like Shakespeare's fellows, with an empty stage. Echoes of his world-engendering voice are potent. Alien and yet familiar, Shakespeare's language overwhelms us with its sheer intensity, and yet we're carried by

the music of it, swept along. His words are both the tempest and the raft” (137).

In Gilman’s *Cry Murder! In a Small Voice*, Jonson attempts to untangle the mysterious murders of several boy players; the villain in this one is a syphilitic Edward de Vere, in whom poetasting and pedophilia are linked evils. He brings the evil Earl to a bad end with the help of a boy actor, whom we learn at the end of the novella has been possessed by the ghost of Christopher Marlowe; as in Bear’s trilogy, he has been enduring an afterlife of servitude to the Faery King following his murder in Deptford.

In the second novella, *Exit, Pursued by a Bear*, Marlowe returns at the bidding of Oberon in his own form, to enchant and attempt to kidnap Prince Charles Stuart for the Fairy King’s court. Oberon is angry that Jonson plans to create a masque named for him for the Stuart court, and hopes to disrupt it. The assumption that the boy actors were sexual objects for the aristocracy, as for the eroticized fairy monarchs, pervades both the novellas, echoing contemporary scholarly interest in the “queer” nature of the transgressive, transvestite stage. The theatrical setting of this chapter is not Shakespeare’s tragedies, as in the previous one, but Jonson and Jones’ fraught preparations at Whitehall. In both chapters, the world of the theatre is a setting for meditations on the fragility of innocence, and of boy actors in particular. Its success depends heavily on an informed reader, one that can recognize the gossip allusions to the work of other theatrical personalities like John Donne, Inigo Jones, and Nathan Field, and also on knowledge of the historical fates of the characters. The weaving of the fantastic into this narrative is much more subtle than in works like Hoyt’s; the presence of a ghostly Marlowe does not change the outcome of historical events or even explain it, but rather adds an elegiac metanarrative in which there exists a larger tragic context for the smaller sufferings of the characters.

Ironically, the injection of fairy mysticism into all these works tends to de-mystify the cultural narrative of creative genius, Shakespeare’s in particular. Lanier suggests it is impossible to approach Shakespeare as a human figure unironically in this postmodern era, and Jim Casey notes, “fantasy has always been marginal” (113), with contemporary fantasy expanding beyond any sense of generic border, coexisting almost entirely within ironic metanarratives (120). The festive machinery of early modern

drama translates easily into the Bakhtinian heteroglossia of proliferating worlds, identified in *The Dialogic Imagination* not only with the secularization of European culture but with the utopian structure of the Western novel. And indeed there is a Utopian impulse present in the effort to reimagine Shakespeare as a magically-inspired progenitor of culture.

When a fantasist chooses among all the infinite spaces of the imagination the nutshell of Shakespeare's world in which to bind herself, she is trusting that the cultural proliferation of Shakespeare's works will make the world intelligible, and that the conflation of an author believed to write “for all time” with his own works will offer readers the same sense of expansiveness they seek in lesser-known worlds. If indeed “all stories are true” in the postmodern sense, and if the authorial presence of Shakespeare is no less a product of collective cultural fantasy than any of his own narratives, then modern fantasy may offer a more direct line of access to the cultural impact of Early Modern English drama than any other genre, gaining a place of equal value in pedagogy and scholarship.

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